

# A LETTER

TO

WM. WILBERFORCE, Esq. M. P.

ON THE SUBJECT OF

## IMPRESSMENT;

CALLING ON HIM AND

THE PHILANTHROPISTS OF THIS COUNTRY

To prove those Feelings of Sensibility they expressed

IN THE CAUSE OF HUMANITY

ON

## Negro Slavery,

BY

ACTING WITH THE SAME ARDOUR AND ZEAL

IN THE

CAUSE OF BRITISH SEAMEN.

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## TO THE PUBLIC.

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Nelson made this signal to Seamen—

“ENGLAND EXPECTS EVERY MAN TO DO HIS DUTY.”

A Seaman now makes this signal to England—

“YOUR FOES ARE SUBDUED! SEAMEN EXPECT EVERY  
MAN TO PERFORM HIS DUTY TOWARDS THEM.”

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## WILLIAM WILBERFORCE, ESQ. M. P.

SIR,

I HAVE been anxiously waiting for the present period, when the foes of our country are subdued, to address you on the subject of Slavery. The great and unwearied efforts you have made to suppress the traffic of human flesh, will transmit your name with honor, as a man and christian, to the most remote posterity. You have at last received the noblest reward in the success which has crowned your labours\*; and the treaty just concluded with France, consecrates your exertions, whilst it shews what a single individual, impelled by an honest zeal, is capable of performing. This perseverance and this success in behalf of the negro, encourages me to claim your powerful aid, in order to redress another grievance equally glaring and where the sufferers have a much stronger title than the African, to your sympathy. The sufferers are Britons; and what is more, to their courage and intrepidity the country is principally indebted for the prosperity and security she now enjoys.

I belong myself to this class of men, whose hardships have been so long and so unaccountably neglected; and whilst you, Sir, and other philanthropists ranged the earth, in order to break the fetters of the slave, you disregarded with singular inconsistency, the ill treatment which the British seaman, the guardian of your independence, has been obliged to endure. In his cause no bolts of eloquence were shot, no commiseration was excited; and whilst he encountered death in every form, and raised the fame of Britain to the highest elevation that can be reached, his ill treatment, though more galling than that of the negro, because he was born and bred up with the rights and feelings of a free man, remain unnoticed and unredressed. Such indifference to this most meritorious class of men would detract much from the sincerity of that sensibility, which was so ostentatiously manifested for the unenlightened

\* Had the same zeal been manifested by Mr. Wilberforce in the cause of British seamen, and upon the subject of Ireland, this country would be able to brave future dangers as it has surmounted past perils. *Apropos for Ireland*: whoever will legislate for that important division of the empire must combine the qualities of our Alfred and of Peter of Russia—he must unite great and extensive views to justice and energy.

African, unless the same persons who have distinguished themselves in redressing the wrongs of the latter, should come forward to relieve the much harsher treatment to which the British seaman has been subjected.

It has been said by you and many others in this country, that the selfish motives of the proprietors of slaves in the West Indies have drawn a film over their eyes, which prevents them from seeing the evils of slavery; allow me to ask you if nine-tenths of the people of this country are not in a similar state, as you term it, of mental and moral blindness towards British seamen, who are deprived of the benefit of the laws of the land; hunted down as wild beasts,\* and treated as I was myself, that you and others may enjoy the freedom and ease you now possess; the principle is the same; but you enjoy advantages in a two-fold degree over the West Indian who only has pecuniary interests; while the people in this country derive not only wealth but national consequence from the hardihood, enterprize, and activity, of men of my profession.

To do away with negro slavery, you brought forward to the public a variety of cruel circumstances selected throughout the West Indies; allow me to ask you, Sir, if an enquiry, not requiring a fiftieth part of the former labour, had been instituted to obtain information on topics of cruelty and brutal behaviour towards British seamen on the shores of the Thames, whether you would not have brought atrocities to light, as revolting as those which you say are committed on the coast of Guinea, or in the West Indies? That they should have so long escaped your notice, and that of other friends of humanity, whose feelings so powerfully revolt at the very name of oppression, exceeds I confess my powers of comprehension. It certainly requires explanation why our philanthropists can see distinctly what is passing to the south of Europe, and cannot discern what is passing in their own country. Far be from me the design of detracting from the generous efforts you have made in the favourite and almost absorbing object of your public labours; I merely wish to stimulate the same energies, and awaken similar sensibility in a cause, that appeals with still greater force to the mind of the man and the citizen. The subject I have taken up, and in aid of which I claim the support of your talents and reputation, needs no empas-sioned delineation—no exaggerated colouring. It only

\* I mean the mode of pricking for men with cutlasses in the hold of vessels, which I have heard called, as described by an officer—pink-ing: this I saw practised until murder had nearly taken place.

requires to be faithfully represented, and brought forward before parliament and the public by a man, whose character is free from the suspicion of factious motives, and whose parliamentary conduct is regulated by his conscience and a sense of the general good: in that case I pledge myself that the evil, which is the subject of this appeal, will be soon redressed. Every motive allied with human suffering, every sentiment associated with a sense of signal services, every inducement coupled with policy; and, in a word, the preservation of our present high fame, prosperity, and rights as a nation, imperiously call for the enquiry and redress I here solicit on behalf of that much neglected and harshly treated class of men of my profession. It will no doubt hereafter exercise the ingenuity of the moralist and of the political inquirer, why the most enlightened country upon earth, famed for its laws and its respect for the rights of the meanest subject, calling at the very time upon the nations of the earth to assist it in the cause of humanity and in the extinction of slavery, should have tolerated the violence and injustice, which constitute the subject of the present letter. The solution of this problem will be more difficult hereafter, when the period that those acts of oppression were permitted, and the class of men who were the victims of it shall be considered: the period the most glorious in our annals—the men the first founders and the bravest supporters of this vast and towering edifice of national glory. Yes, it was at such a period that the gallant and *constitutional* defenders of our national independence were exposed, without protection and without mercy, to be dragged away by fellows, (the outcasts of human nature,) from their wives, their children and friends, on board a receiving ship, and confined, under locks and bolts, as felons; excluded from intercourse with their friends, subjected against their will to the rigor of martial law, and liable to be sent to a foreign station for an undefined period. Sir, it is not my wish to raise yours or the public interest, by presenting this subject in a glaring point of view. My silence, during the continuance of hostilities with a cruel and perfidious enemy, is a pledge of the purity of my motives; and it were perhaps to be wished that you had, in the agitation of a memorable question, acted with the same degree of discretion, and with an equal degree of unwillingness to embarrass the march of the executive government.

To give you some idea of the impress, I shall mention a circumstance which occurred to myself. While walking in a street in the east end of London in the year 1808, in

the month of July, about nine o'clock in the evening, with my wife holding by one of my arms, and her sister by the other, I was stopped by a man who demanded who I was ; on which I desired to be informed by what authority he dared to ask me that question. I had hardly uttered the words when I was brutally seized by him and two or three more. My wife received a violent blow on the breast, which compelled her to quit her hold ; and which was struck with such force that symptoms of a cancer appeared in a short time afterwards ; those symptoms continued for several months, and only the first medical attention could have prevented the consequences that were apprehended. The ruffians struck me on the head, tore my coat from my back, and afterwards dragged me by the neck for fifty yards, until life was nearly exhausted. At this critical moment some people who had collected from curiosity, fortunately happened to recognise me, interfered, and probably by this means saved my life. The fellows who had been guilty of this daring outrage upon a British subject, ran off to save themselves from the indignation which their violence had excited in the crowd. Having been informed that they belonged to a gang on the impress service, I applied to Lieut. Crawford for their names, which he refused to comply with ; and requested me to compromise the outrage : of course I rejected the proposal. I next applied to the Lord Mayor, who represented my case to Lord Howick, then first Lord of the Admiralty ; his lordship, after instituting an enquiry, transmitted the report he received from Capt. Richbald, with an affidavit of the gang, and the report of Lieut. C—— ; all of whom, according to their own testimony, were the most harmless of men. At the same time Lord Howick represented that it was not in his power to punish the man, but that he should not be protected by government if I chose to enforce the civil law against him. *A most gracious boon!* Such were the feelings of sensibility expressed by Lord Howick, on an injury done to a British seaman, and to the females of his family : compare them with the ostentatious sympathy he always manifested on the subject of Negro Slavery, and then inform me if he deserves that a mercantile seaman should risk his life to protect him and his family from a foreign enemy. It was the bounden duty of his lordship to have discharged this man from the service, and to have publicly expressed the most marked disapprobation of the conduct of the officers under whom he acted, in order to offer a salutary example to others. This man was continued in the service during the war.



Upon application to my solicitor I was advised, if I wished to inflict punishment on the delinquent, to sue him in the Court of King's Bench for damages, (although he was not worth a shilling) in preference to an indictment, as the plea of state necessity might be set up as an excuse for his conduct, and be perhaps accepted by the magistrates.

At the expiration of four months of trouble and expense, and having no positive evidence to prove the first part of the assault, I received from the jury a verdict for fifty pounds damages\*. The compensation appears trivial for such an act of outrage, but it produced the effect I desired; the fellow absconded for some months, when he found means to offer me security for payment in the course of two years, by instalments, which I accepted. This sum did not pay my law expences, not to speak of the medical and other incidental expences, incurred by this act of violence.

But what would have been the situation of a man differently circumstanced to what I was, with regard to property, and who would not have had the means of suing for redress. He would have been dragged on board the tender, perhaps sent off to a foreign station; his wife, without money and protection, would have been left exposed to the effects of the violence she had sustained, to which she must inevitably have fallen a victim; whilst her distress and agony would be inexpressibly sharpened, from the despair of never again seeing her husband: had she a family depending on his exertions for their subsistence, her misery would be intolerable.

Had a negro slave sustained a similar outrage, and the circumstance had come to your knowledge, would it not have awakened all your indignation, and called forth the strongest powers of your eloquence: the public, inflamed by your means, into a sense of the outrage, would have been unable to sleep soundly until they had brought the delinquent to a trial, as they did Governor Picton. Though to the memory of that great man, whose merit was slowly recognised, the same public are now erecting a monument!

When the interests of seamen are so unaccountably overlooked, and that too by persons whose duty it is to protect them, we should modify our surprise, that mercan-

\* This was fully more than I expected; as pecuniary satisfaction was not to be obtained, neither was it my aim; unfortunately, I could not prove the person who struck my wife; this prevented me from instituting a criminal prosecution against them.

the seamen desert their country. In April last, when the nation was again likely to be involved in war, it was found, that we had not regularly bred seamen to man our ships, had their service been required. I then wrote to Lord Melville a note, stating, that if he would allow me to wait upon his Lordship, I should present a plan for raising seamen, within a certain time, to man our navy, and for doing away with the evils of the impress service.

His Lordship was pleased to give me an audience; and desired me to commit to paper my ideas on the subject, of which I now enclose you the substance\*.

About a month after I had submitted my plan to his Lordship, Sir Wm. Scott obtained leave, in the House of Commons, to bring forward a bill for the encouragement of seamen, and for the more effectually manning his Majesty's navy during the war. I expected that something agreeable to the title of the bill would have been framed. On the 15th of July, the bill passed: it confined itself to a simple regulation for the distribution of prize-money. With all due respect to Sir Wm. Scott, and deference to his profound judgment as a lawyer, I take upon myself to say, that he misunderstood the character of our mercantile seamen, in supposing that the provisions of that bill, would answer the object expressed in the title.

To accomplish the purpose specified in the title of the bill is what every man in this country wishes; and I have no doubt, but that the outlines of the plan which I submitted Lord Melville, in May last, would, in time, produce those great and desirable results. Penetrated with this conviction, I therefore most earnestly claim your attention, and that of every person interested in the welfare of the country, to a bill containing the provision which I submitted to the first lord of the Admiralty, and as offering the most efficacious means of our retaining that political rank among nations, which we at present possess. In claiming your assistance, I do it under the impression that Lord Melville and the other members of the cabinet, however solicitous they may be, cannot interfere directly to promote mine, or some better plan; for such is the weight of our naval establishment in political affairs, and the reluctance to resign any portion of the influence attached to that administration, that any plan immediately emanating from them, must be defective. However, should America become a naval power, some effectual scheme must be adopted, and that promptly, or we must

\* My letter to Lord Melville in May 1815, published in December last.

prepare for the loss of our present maritime ascendancy, as well as of all the advantages derived from it.

To raise regularly bred seamen, and retain them voluntarily on board our ships of war, the project I have suggested must be taken up with zeal, and prosecuted with the same ardour and perseverance, that were manifested in the question of the slave trade. Public opinion would be thus enlisted in its support, which would remove many impediments, to which the executive government might be otherwise exposed; whilst it should prove an effectual check to the interested opposition of naval men.

It is generally admitted that our naval system, with respect to the treatment and management of seamen, has something radically bad, arising from a variety of causes. One perhaps is, that the articles of war are not sufficiently defined, and are left too much to the will and caprice of an officer, who too often trained, from his childhood, in the most arbitrary principles, exercises a kind of discretionary command over men, who, beyond all others, have their peculiar prejudices, manners, and ideas of submission. Had the friends of humanity taken up the interests of our mercantile seamen, with the same zeal that they manifested on questions of much less importance, and compared their situation with that of French conscripts or negro slaves, they would have found the condition of the latter almost enviable, when contrasted with that of the former. The conscript law was a general law of the land, and acted equally on all men; and as to the West Indian slave, the master has a particular interest in his welfare; whereas, the abuses of impressment, and the arbitrary conduct of many naval officers, with the refusal of mankind acting under them, accompanied by the stern wants of the public service, expose our mercantile seamen in time of war, to such oppression and insult, that the suffering of the two former classes of persons, may be considered comparatively light. The masters of merchant ships and their officers, are not exempt in their persons or property, from this system of abuse, contrary as it is to express regulations.

Had the same attention been paid by you and others to British seamen, as to the enslaved African, the public would, no doubt, have been informed, if the various circumstances\* oftentimes related as founded on fact, were true; if so, they would deserve public exposure, in order to

\* Here is a field for the research and the sensibility of the philanthropist, and to a certain degree will account for the difficulty to procure men to man our ships on the peace establishment.

correct the evil. If unfounded, they ought to be formally contradicted, with a view to efface that aversion to the naval service, which such rumours have on the minds of our seamen and lads, as well as to diminish the causes of desertion, which are already too numerous. My view in alluding to this, is to direct your attention and that of other friends of humanity, to a class of men to whom the country is peculiarly indebted, who have raised its glory to its highest pitch, and extended its influence to the boundaries of the earth. If you will enquire into their hardships, you will find that they are not inferior, at times, to those sustained by the negro slave. I am well aware, that my remarks will pass unheeded, or obtain a very slight attention, from the prepossessions which generally prevail in favour of our naval service—*blind fatality!*

It has been advanced by officers, of late years, that they can train men for the navy, in a short space of time, to answer all the purposes of the service. That courage and physical strength may belong to any man, I readily believe; however, when the Americans made war upon us, their confidence received a check, for they soon found that men, possessing the skill and conduct of regularly bred seamen, were wanting to cope with the enemy. This truth will be equally conspicuous in every future contest, unless proper methods are taken to frame a system, by which the country may be served with regularly bred seamen, who can alone secure her pre-eminence at sea.

Having understood that you see most things in a religious point of view, I shall beg leave to direct your attention to what has happened in Europe, since the year 1789, down to the present period. Providence has given a lesson to all the European powers, and that in the most pointed manner, by severely visiting them in what they valued most, and in which they supposed they were least of all assailable.

FRANCE; Paris,—the Sodom and Gomorrah\* of the day,—where the king was generally revered more than the Supreme Being; yet, what was his fate? His power was first undermined by false reasoning, and next, he was murdered by those apostles of anarchy and impiety,—the jacobins and sceptics. His murderers, in their turn, were trampled upon by a man, who rose out of their own body, and who united in his own person all their vices.

PRUSSIA, raised by the events of war, and who va-

\* I apply this epithet in consequence of a story related to me by an officer of the French king's guard in 1790.

lued herself on the formidable strength of her army, saw it totally annihilated, in one day, by this child, champion, and scourge of jacobinism.

HOLLAND, the modern Carthage, where every thing was venal, and where the best sentiments of the human mind were absorbed in pecuniary interest. This nation was plundered in an extraordinary degree, and robbed of what it prized above honour and patriotism.

AUSTRIA, a state which valued itself upon the pre-eminence of its reigning family, was reduced to the most mortifying of all degradations, that of sacrificing a princess of this illustrious house to an usurper, and who, at the same time, was its most cruel enemy.

RUSSIA, who considered herself unassailable, and capable of defying the combined enmity of all the other powers of Europe, on account of her geographical situation, and the magnitude of her military establishment, saw the same conqueror, penetrate to the heart of her empire, and was obliged to burn the *sacred city*, to save herself from subjugation.

The victor himself, lifted up in his own imagination beyond human nature, and the assaults of adverse fortune, was, in the very midst of this proud security, tumbled down *at once* from all his grandeur, and, through a visible manifestation of Divine Power. Though allowed to rise again, it was only to make his second fall a greater and more memorable lesson to mankind.

Our own country, who valued herself on the supposed invincibility of her navy, has in several engagements, been foiled by a nation possessing only a few ships, but those *manned by mercantile seamen*.

At present, the people of France have all the nations of Europe upon them, to punish them for their past ambition, and to cure them of their mad passion for universal empire. Sir, I have produced these instances, to shew that Eternal Justice never slumbers, and that pride, when it becomes too towering, defying divine and human precepts, is certain of being punished in the very height of its presumption. I have, also, enumerated those examples, in order to prove, that the suggestions of human prudence, too often despised in the hour of prosperity, are never deviated from with impunity. To retain power, it is indispensably necessary to cultivate the means by which it was acquired: *this remark is peculiarly applicable to naval ascendancy*.

Those few observations also suffice to prove, that the Supreme Being has been giving a lesson to governments

and people, for the regulation of their respective conduct, as well as to shew, that their happiness is inseparable. To the former it has been palpably manifested, that the rights and privileges of their subjects are as sacred as their own, which it is not only their duty, but their interest, to protect. To the people it has been proved, that strict obedience is due, on their part, to laws framed for the general good, for the order and welfare of society; and, that they are bound to respect, and submit to, those, who have the cares, the duties, and the awful responsibility of governing men.

Let us now apply this grave lesson to our own country: it appears to have been selected from amongst the nations of the earth, and raised by Divine Providence to an extraordinary height of power, first to check, and next destroy, the power of the scourge of mankind; yet, when we reflect on the check we received ourselves, and that from a people we were in the habit of despising, the more we ought to be impressed with the necessity of deriving benefit from that lesson, particularly as our vital interest depends upon its observance.

Carthage exercised the same empire over the sea, which we do now. When the first causes of dispute broke out between that state and Rome, the latter had not a single galley, and no other shipping than a few coasting vessels. At that time the Carthaginians covered the seas with their ships of war, yet the Romans were not discouraged; with the perseverance and spirit of enterprize, characteristic of that great and wise people, and which difficulties only irritated, they were able at last to encounter their rival upon her own element, and to destroy gradually her power, her commerce, and at last her existence!

Let us now, Sir, come to a point, which begins to attract much and very general attention; I allude to the outrages so long exercised by the Algerines.

Can it be otherwise than mortifying, to men of my profession, that they are obliged to have recourse to a Mediterranean pass, to enable them to navigate that sea with safety: it does not well accord with our naval superiority. I merely advert to this circumstance, to shew how the government of the United States, the naval department of which is guided by mercantile seamen, recently conducted itself; and, I have no doubt, that the severe correction inflicted by the American navy upon the piratical states, will rank amongst the first causes to foster the rising spirit of that commercial state. As one of the objects of my letter is to prevent this spirit from becoming formi-

dable to ourselves, the circumstance, I have just mentioned, offers another inducement to man our navy with regularly bred seamen, for to this point alone, the Americans are indebted for any distinction they may have acquired in their recent maritime operations.

Who were the first men that raised the commerce of this and every other state? Mercantile seamen.

Who fought the early battles of this country, and gave to it the rank of a maritime power? Mercantile seamen.

Who have principally contributed to raise our navy to its present state? Mercantile seamen.

Who fought the first battles of the late war, until the navies of Europe were subdued? Mercantile seamen.

Who was the cause of the renovation of the transport service since the year 1803, and thus added much to the political welfare of the country, besides saving some millions of money? \* A mercantile seaman.

Who submits the present plan, founded on a progressive system of emulation and reward, for a more effectual mode of manning the navy? A mercantile seaman.

I am far from mentioning these facts from motives of personal vanity, but wish merely to point out the incongruity, and indeed ingratitude, of suffering a class of men, to whom the country chiefly owes its prosperity and consequence, to be exposed to the hardships I have enumerated. This disregard to their interests and rights is the more unaccountable, when it is considered, that a criminal in a jail, if he happen to sustain harsh treatment, is certain to meet an advocate in parliament to espouse his injury: yet, the British mercantile seaman, the main pillar of the state, has hitherto found none, either in the legislature or executive, to stand forward in his cause.

You may perhaps express some surprize, that a private individual should take up a task of this magnitude, instead of leaving it to the Admiralty Board or to naval officers, who from peculiar sources of information, may appear to you, as they do to many others, more competent to the task. The inattention hitherto manifested by both to this great object, is an answer to one part of the question, whilst I deny the superior competency; naval-bred officers, through the want of proper experience, and from the abuses inseparable from uncontrouled command, are very incompetent to form a plan, for raising and managing

\* I can produce proofs to this last statement, if called upon; and they will prove the advantage of mercantile bred seamen in the management of nautical affairs; for to this cause I attribute that the alteration of system I then recommended had the desired effect.

mercantile seamen, who can never divest themselves of a sense of their rights as free born subjects, which is constantly wounded by the arbitrary nature of the discipline established in our navy. My plan is, to do away with the necessity of this arbitrary treatment. To raise seamen, and to form their minds to volunteer their services into the navy, which can only be done, by blending the two services to a certain extent together; as seamen have, of all other men, the strongest prepossessions where their profession is concerned. They never will cheerfully submit to be commanded by men who are not seamen like themselves.

A naval bred officer, according to the present training, cannot possibly acquire the proper knowledge of commanding merchant seamen; his only resource is the strong arm of power, which disgusts and alienates the minds of men trained as the former are. This proves the indispensable necessity of commencing a total renovation of our naval system, which can only be done effectually, by bringing the subject before the legislature, where the merits of the question can be fully discussed in a committee, who could examine intelligent and experienced men from both services, naval and mercantile. It is only by an enquiry of this nature, that the subject can be completely canvassed and understood; and I feel persuaded, from my own knowledge and experience, that the improvements I suggest, may be rendered of much easier execution than is generally imagined. When did merchant seamen hesitate to volunteer their services to fight the battles of their country when the public service required it? If any lukewarmness was ever manifested, it arose solely from the dread of being detained for an undefined period in the naval service. As the whole course of our history bears out my assertion, it proves, that want of courage does not enter into the aversion, which they now generally manifest for the naval service. At the same time, this growing repugnance conveys a strong proof that the present mode of discipline is founded on wrong principles, and does not conform with the feelings and notions of men like ours, born under a free constitution; this discipline also checks the nobler impulses which stimulate men to heroic acts, and which the British seaman will ever achieve, if his country will but duly appreciate his exertions. He will also continue to secure to her the trident of the sea, against any new rival that may arise, as he has done against former competitors.

It is not to be supposed, that men, who have imbibed the opinions that Mr. Pitt wished to instil into them,



namely, that the rights and privileges of a Briton, are ever to be held sacred on this side the grave, will submit cheerfully to the violation of both as in the instances I have described.

The very ideas that you, and the friends of humanity, have endeavoured to impress on the minds of all men who are taken away and restrained against their will, (the principles on which you found a state of slavery,) have tended to render our seamen more alive to, and more impatient under, the arbitrary restrictions that are imposed upon them. I, therefore, insist upon the justice and propriety, that as the country requires the services of this particular class of men, as well as the sacrifice of their rights and privileges, the country is imperiously bound to remunerate them, not only with such other rights and privileges as may be connected with their profession, but also with further remuneration to place them on an equality with other men. This would be an indemnification toward them for the sacrifice required, and it would be adequate to remove the evils I have so often alluded to, as well as the degrading and irritating mode of procuring men by impressment.

The word discipline, perhaps is not not so generally understood as it ought to be, by officers commanding men : too many of them define it to be submissive obedience to every regulation or order, which they may arbitrarily suggest, however unnecessary, with a view to the good of the service, and however wantonly imposed upon men. The *perfection* of it, in their ideas, is *passive* submission to the will, and even *caprice* of a superior. I shall not attempt to refute so arrogant a doctrine ; I conceive the basis of true discipline to be a system of reasonable rules, adapted to the duties and necessities of the service ; strict obedience to those rules, and the performance of those duties, constitute the virtue of the subordinates, whilst that of the officer consists in seeing them faithfully executed, and in never exacting more. He should also be able to ascertain what his men are competent to do, and not require more from them than their ability and capacity are adequate to perform. He should possess the art of being able to work upon the minds of his crew, and thus facilitate, by calling forth their moral energies, the execution of the duty required. His own conduct should, at the same time, serve as an example and a guide to all ; he should never make an unreasonable demand, or deny a reasonable request ; his word once given, should be sacred, and his eye should perpetually watch over the

comforts of those entrusted to his care; an adherence to those rules would tend more effectually than the ostentatious display of power, which is too often exhibited, to retain the men in a sense of their duty, and to make them perform it with zeal and alacrity.

As things are often best understood by comparison, and as I have more than once contrasted the hardships to which our mercantile seamen are exposed in time of war, permit me, Sir, to state a few instances connected with negro slavery, which will not only shew that the comparison is not improper, but that much misrepresentation has gone forth respecting the treatment of slaves in the West Indies.

I have known a concern in one of those islands which had from twenty to thirty negroes, most of whom were sailors, and who during the late war, were captured, some once, twice, and even thrice, and were conveyed to that land of liberty and equality, Guadaloupe, all of whom voluntarily returned to their owners as soon as they could get away, except one who could not be accounted for; but this you will perhaps say was a rare instance. Sir, I could produce various of the same kind, as well attested as any other fact, and which would shew that no small share of exaggeration has prevailed on the subject; however, it substantiates the truth of my comparison, and I might go farther, and ask, if there be one instance on record, of mercantile seamen who had been impressed into the naval service, with the same opportunity to evade it, ever voluntarily returning to it again.

I shall produce another circumstance, as shewing the gross delusion practiced upon the public on the subject of the treatment of negroes in the West Indies; no cause ought to be supported by false statements, and it could be easily proved, that the triumph which signalises your Parliamentary exertions, owed part of its success to the most extravagant colouring. I quote, amongst several others, the following, as an instance. In the print-shops in London, a negro is represented with an iron mouth-piece, and this exhibition has been made with a view to make the public suppose, that this mouth-piece is put on to prevent the slave from eating sugar or cane; yet the whole of the inference intended to be drawn from this subject is false.\*

\* When I say this, I mean as to the cause ascribed for the use of it. That it may have been put upon a negro for a criminal act, as punishment, I can believe, although I never saw it done, or heard of its being done. In this country for the same act, you perhaps would have put a rope round his neck.

There is a distemper\* to which negroes are subject, and at which time they are in the habit, unless forcibly prevented, of eating earth; at this time their mouth is covered until cure can be effected. This is the secret of the terrific mouth-piece, which has been the topic of so much invective against West Indians. It is not my intention to defend the principle or the practice of slavery; I am only anxious that the persons who have displayed so much fervour, zeal, and perseverance in attacking both, would look at home, and try to correct the evils to which I have called your attention in the course of this letter. To the condition of the lower classes in this and every other country, hardships are attached, which demand as much sympathy as the case of the African.

I have in this country (acknowledged to possess advantages over every other) seen women with baskets at their backs carrying dung to the field, men loading them, whilst the horses were standing in the stable. Was the situation of these women, in point of servitude and drudgery, preferable to that of slaves in the West Indies?—yet it has not elicited the same declamation.

With all the clamour we have heard about West Indians, for their malpractices towards people of colour, it cannot but appear singular, that one of the most atrocious acts of this kind was committed by one of your supporters, an ex-member of the House of Commons, and an ex-governor of a West India island. He, like most other men who go to that country, soon abjured his opinions respecting the condition of negro slavery. This person—this strenuous advocate for justice to people of colour—borrowed five hundred heavy joes from a Mulatto, and repaid him with light ones. The *pride* of a West Indian, leaving honesty and humanity out of the question, would have made him spurn at the idea of committing so mean an act.

I have been astonished at the reasons advanced for the decree by which Buonaparte abolished the slave-trade, as if they merely arose from a wish to gain allies among the friends of humanity in this country and elsewhere. By this act, which originated in any other motives but those of humanity, this able and profligate man,—knowing that St. Domingo was lost to France, and the other colonies

\* This oftentimes arises through weakness and debility of stomach, brought on by living principally on roots and vegetables, without having a necessary share of animal or salt food to correct it. The French call this *Mal d'estomac*; the English call their patients *Earth-eaters*: the former generally apply the mouth-piece; the latter often send them on board of vessels to prevent it.

lost at least to him,—made parade of a virtue which cost him nothing, and probably hoped, by making the practice general, to embarrass us one day in our colonial system. This policy he well knew would *depress our marine*. I have also been respectably informed, that immediately after passing this famous *décrée*, this artful impostor granted licences to some individuals for carrying on the slave trade, which he had so ostentatiously abolished.

After this, I hope you will see the necessity of attending to the 41st and 42nd verses of the sixth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, before you think of going further from home. If you will give yourself the same trouble you have taken with negro slavery, and use your influence in the same degree with the Legislature, to institute an inquiry into the evils to which mercantile seamen are exposed, you would in that case bring circumstances to light, which should astonish you and the friends of humanity; for they would prove that, under the mode of impressment hitherto practised, acts of oppression have taken place which are a disgrace to a civilized country, and which, I hope, are equally unknown to Government\* as they are to the public in general.

The following, I conceive, ought to be among the subjects for a Committee of the Legislature:—

1st, What has been the general conduct of the impress service during the late war?

2nd, What is the present state of naval discipline, and if it is founded on principles adapted to the command of regularly bred seamen?

3rd, Are the present articles of war for seamen suited to the enlightened minds of men of the present day?

4th, What has been the general conduct of officers towards men?

5th, What is the cause of the rooted aversion in the minds of our mercantile seamen to the naval service?

6th, What is the best method to raise a sufficient number of seamen in time of war, to man our navy and merchants' service without foreigners?

7th, What would be the most efficacious mode of training men and boys in the merchants' service, *which is the only good school*, to make them effective seamen, and form their minds for the navy, when the country may require their services?

8th, What mode of training is best adapted for officers to enable them to command mercantile seamen, render them effective, and prevent desertion?

9th, What privileges or rights ought to be granted to

\* To this ignorance I attribute most of the evils which have been pointed out in this letter.

seamen, so as to place them upon an equality with other men, when the country requires their particular services, and exacts sacrifices from them beyond those which are imposed upon any other class of his Majesty's subjects?

10th, How far is it necessary to blend the two services together for general and individual good?

11th, What would be the best method to give employment to our seamen after the conclusion of a war, until their numbers were reduced to answer the peace establishment of the navy and the merchant service?

12th, What would be the best plan for the gradual extinction of impressment, without depriving the Executive altogether of the right of exercising such power on great and sudden emergencies?

13th, Whether a serious injury does not arise to the naval service, by holding it up as a place of punishment for those who commit petty crimes, when it ought to be held up as a service of honour and interest?

14th, What is the cause that men taken from the merchants' service with a good moral character, after having been in the navy, though for a short time, become more or less corrupted; so much so, that they have great difficulty in again obtaining employment in the mercantile service when any others can be obtained?

15th, What would be the best plan, during peace, of ascertaining as nearly as possible the number of seamen that might be obtained for the naval service, in case of war; and what would be the best means, should their numbers be insufficient, of obtaining the requisite supply in the shortest space of time?

16th, How far it would tend to the general good, to cause all ships, in those trades that particularly belong to this country, to carry a certain number of people according to tonnage, and to do away with direct taxation as a means of indemnifying the owners for the increase of expense?

The difficulty that has hitherto appeared to the minds of statesmen and of persons at the head of the Admiralty, of every attempt to do away with impressment, has intimidated Government from entering seriously into any plan for the improvement of our present imperfect naval code. This repugnance may be easily accounted for: the execution of such a plan would require the experience of men intimately acquainted with the merchants' service; in short, it could only be carried into effect by practical mercantile seamen. Naval-bred officers, although they

may possess much sound judgment in other respects, are not calculated to frame laws and regulations for the guidance of mercantile seamen, which is acknowledged by many of themselves. If our ships are to be effectually manned, which can only be done by employing native and regularly bred seamen, trained from their earliest youth to all the hardships and exertion of the profession—inured to every climate and to the changes of season—who possessing, at the same time, peculiar manners and habits and way of thinking. To command such persons properly, (many of whom are of as respectable parents, and possess the advantages of as good an education, as many of the officers in our navy, and consequently ought to have a fair chance of promotion in the service,) it would be requisite that the officers commanding such men should unite to a thorough knowledge of their profession the exemplary conduct that is expected from superiors. It is also indispensable that they should be practical seamen; for a seaman will never look up with respect and confidence to an officer who is not master of his profession.

It is an error very prevalent in the naval profession to insist, that it is not necessary that an officer should be a practical seaman. It is unnecessary to combat so gross a delusion, particularly in a commercial country, where every man who commands a ship of war ought to be able to take charge of and conduct a convoy; a duty which absolutely requires nautical knowledge and ability of the first rate, as well as a thorough acquaintance with what merchant ships are able to perform. To the want of this knowledge and ability may be attributed the loss of many millions during the late war, as well as much serious injury in a political point of view. Should this defect remain uncorrected, and another American war break out, the consequences might be most calamitous.\*

From the zeal, Sir, which you have uniformly displayed upon every subject connected with the public good, I am entitled to claim the aid of your talents and influence towards the correction of an evil, which is of equal magnitude with negro slavery, and appeals with infinitely more force to British sympathy. Had you and your friends been acquainted with its extent, the extraordinary expressions would not have been used in parliament, "that it would be better the war should last ten years longer than that the abolition of the slave trade should not be sanctioned by treaty." The sentiment did not express much benevolence towards our mercantile seamen, who

\* This well deserves the serious attention of government, of the merchant, ship-owner, and naval officer; as also a case lately brought on in the Court of Common Pleas—Faith v. Pearson.

were exposed, as long as hostilities lasted, to the hardships I have so frequently enumerated.

Though a stranger to you, Sir, I am bold to say that few men are better acquainted with the state of our mercantile seamen; and few have had, and now have, more intercourse with that meritorious class. I shall further take the liberty of stating, that if proper regulations were once adopted for doing away with the evils of impressment, I feel no hesitation in saying, that I can do as much towards carrying into effect the ideas I have advanced, as almost any man in this kingdom.

The plan I have proposed will correspond with that which you formed for the extinction of negro slavery, but with this difference, that you in the first instance pretended only to aim at amelioration, while you are gradually going on to total abolition; whereas, I set out with the intention of doing away with impressment altogether, by working in such manner upon the minds of our youth, as should prepare them gradually for voluntary and limited service in the navy. This would lead to the idea, that it is a duty imperative upon them to serve their country; and, when it is impressed upon them, on first entering into the mercantile service, that they are liable to be called upon for a fixed period, to defend the rights, the honour, and the interest of their country, there is no doubt that, in due time, it will have the desired effect.

Here, Sir, is a fine and an ample field for your patriotism; it will also afford scope for the exercise of your humanity and sense of justice. That the plan has not been sooner taken up and carried into effect, may have partly arisen from the extraordinary state of public affairs for the last twenty-five years; and many, who perhaps felt its expediency, might not have had the experience and knowledge requisite to arrange and accomplish it. I have not taken up the subject from private interest, or party motives; but having been a witness for a number of years of the evils I propose to correct, I feel conscious at the same time that I could not more effectually promote the interests of my country, than by advocating the rights and improving the condition of our mercantile seamen.

My political creed, as well as, I hope, that of every seaman, has always been founded upon this leading point—My king and my country's cause, let who will guide the helm of affairs; because I conceive it to be the duty of every man to aid the executive government whilst it acts for the public good; for government and command, founded upon judgment and justice, and obedience with respect for rights and privileges, tend to the good of all men.

That the present state of peace, at the conclusion of a long war, is the best suited to discuss this subject, is not to be disputed. The discussion at this time can have no bad effect on the service, nor throw obstacles in the way of government; at the same time the subject is now more familiar to the minds of men than it will be to the rising generation, after a few years of peace. The time is therefore unobjectionable; and the execution of the plan cannot be longer postponed, without adding to the difficulties of accomplishment, and without the most serious detriment to the naval service. The American government is straining every nerve to improve and extend its navy; and as our relations with that power appear to be extremely precarious, it would be downright infatuation to neglect this vital subject longer.

It is a melancholy fact, that the mode of impressment during the war had nearly annihilated British mercantile seamen and officers, so that we had not proper persons to train the rising generation in their duties as seamen. This, it must be confessed, is a serious evil, in a country whose vital interests depend upon her marine, and proves the imperious necessity of substituting a better system.

Another session of parliament ought not to pass by without applying a remedy to the evil.\* It is impossible, in the present state of the political world, to say how long we may enjoy the blessings of peace. Though the rage of the storm is spent, yet the clouds are not wholly dispersed. It is therefore imperative upon us to be prepared for every possible contingency; and as the navy is the firmest and most constitutional bulwark of these kingdoms, as well as the great source of our power and security, it is therefore the first and most urgent of all duties to improve its condition, and to insure to it hereafter the ascendancy it has hitherto possessed.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

your obedient Servant,

THOMAS URQUHART.

*Lloyd's Coffee House, Jan. 1816.*

\* Perhaps no man in the kingdom has ever given this subject a tenth part of the thought I have bestowed upon it, from the circumstance alluded to in my Letter to Lord Melville, which was, that in my father's house, the plan for the bill for registering of seamen, was principally written by a friend; perhaps one of the best-informed nautical men of the age, and at that time in nautical affairs the right hand of Sir Philip Stephens, then Secretary of the Admiralty. The discussions which this led to were so impressed upon my mind when a boy, that it has been a thought through life.





